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Fifteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 294th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Monday, 22 January 1996, at 10 a.m.

Chairperson: Ms. CORTI

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The meeting was called to order at 10.20 a.m.

CONSIDERATION OF REPORTS SUBMITTED BY STATES PARTIES UNDER ARTICLE 18 OF THE CONVENTION (continued)

Combined second and third periodic reports of Cuba (CEDAW/C/CUB/2-3 and Add.1)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Ms. Ferrer Gómez (Cuba) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Ms. FERRER GÓMEZ (Cuba), introducing the combined second and third periodic reports of Cuba (CEDAW/C/CUB/2-3 and Add.1), said that Cuba had been the first country to sign the Convention and the second to ratify it. She was pleased to have an opportunity to demonstrate the results of a policy which had been begun by her Government in 1959 and to which it attached high priority. Although much remained to be done, it was undeniable that a fundamental change had taken place and that there had been steady progress in the status of women, who were a vital part of Cuban society.

3. The Committee needed to be aware of the complex circumstances faced by Cuba over the past five years in order to understand the circumstances in which Cuban women were currently living and to appreciate how, despite its difficult situation, Cuba had managed to continue the momentum towards full equality. The people of Cuba had shown utter determination not to be defeated by shortages and external pressures and to preserve the country's sovereignty and independence during one of the most difficult periods in its history.

4. In 1989, 85 per cent of Cuba's external trade had been with the Soviet Union and other socialist countries, as a result of a relationship instituted 30 years previously when the Government of the United States had responded to Cuba's Revolution with a policy of aggression intended to maintain Cuba as a natural colony of the United States. For more than three decades, the solidarity of the socialist countries had offset the impact of the United States blockade, and the vast majority of Cuba's development plans had been based on their cooperation.

5. In 1990, when Cuba had been attempting to re-enter the world economy and the cold war was allegedly at an end, the United States Government had stepped up the blockade in an attempt to bring the Cuban people to its knees. The blockade was the worst form of violence that could be inflicted on Cuba's women; it was a deliberate aggression that violated the most elementary rules of international law and the principles of the Charter of the United Nations. Moreover, it was not confined to bilateral relations. Veiled or open threats were made against companies and individuals from any country who attempted to invest in Cuba or to engage in any kind of commercial, financial or technological exchanges with it. New measures to strengthen and internationalize the blockade, in violation of the sovereignty not only of Cuba but of other States, had recently been proposed in the Congress of the United States. The intensification of the blockade had caused a steady deterioration in the daily food intake of the Cuban people, affecting pregnant women and children in particular, and in the overall standard of living.

6. She was not attempting to downplay or deny the mistakes which Cuba had made in the management of its economy: the Government had in fact begun a process of rectifying those errors in 1985, in an attempt to achieve greater efficiency. After a drop of almost 35 per cent in its gross domestic product since 1989, Cuba had at last managed to end its recession in 1994, and in 1995 had achieved a growth rate of 2.5 per cent. It would therefore be unjust to blame the Revolution for the current difficulties, which were caused largely by external factors.

7. She apologized to the Committee for the failure of the second and third periodic reports to follow the Committee's guidelines. The reports attempted to provide a broad overview of the current situation of Cuban women in order to expand on the initial report and to answer the questions put by the Committee in 1983.

8. The elimination of all forms of discrimination against women remained an essential goal and a permanent policy of the Government of Cuba. Part of the enormous challenge faced by the Government over the past five years had been to ensure that women were not discriminated against when the necessary adjustments in the Cuban economy were made, and to protect all their rights and continue working for their advancement. Practical realization of the principle of equality was subject to constant analysis and had been evaluated in depth at the sixth congress of the Federation of Cuban Women held in March 1995. Some 2 million women had participated in the preparatory discussions held in neighbourhoods and places of work and study. As a result of the congress, the National Assembly of People's Power was to consider a number of proposed improvements to the Family Code, and a number of efforts were under way to increase women's awareness of their legal rights.

9. Cuban women participated actively in the country's political, economic, cultural and social life and exercised their human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis with men. In its attempts to overcome the current economic crisis, the Government had applied none of the drastic adjustment policies which, in other countries, had abolished the most basic rights of vast sectors of the population by closing down factories, schools and hospitals, privatizing major national assets and lowering the living standards of millions of people. The Government had decided that whatever was available should be shared equally among everyone; prices had been frozen, no child had been left without a school or classroom without a teacher, and not a single hospital had been closed. All shortages were shared equally. The situation had been thoroughly explained to the population, the vast majority of whom were prepared to play their part in the necessary efforts. The Government had at all times listened to public opinion, and women had been actively involved in the discussions which had led to the necessary broad national consensus. In Cuba, there was genuine popular participation in government, and in that respect women exercised their rights fully.

10. As explained in the report, maternity leave with full pay had been increased to one and a half months before the birth and six months after it. If the mother decided to spend an additional six months with her child, the law guaranteed her right to keep her job, but without pay. That measure was intended to promote a longer period of breastfeeding, which could be beneficial

to the child's development. Children of working mothers could attend day nurseries from the age of six months, and mothers received subsidized milk and other proteins for their children, in addition to other food assistance.

11. The Ministries of Public Health and Higher Education, together with the Federation of Cuban Women, had continued to develop and promote programmes designed to alter socio-cultural behaviour patterns among women and men. A number of other initiatives were described in the report. Women made up 50 per cent of the country's voters. After the constitutional reform, direct elections had been held in March 1993 for the local and provincial authorities and for the National Assembly. Voter participation had been 98.7 per cent. Voting was not compulsory and was held by secret ballot; it was extremely easy to register to vote. Voters were called upon to elect the best candidates, without distinction of any kind. No one needed to have financial assets or campaign financing in order to run for office, and in order to be elected, each candidate had to receive at least 50 per cent of the votes cast. Cuba practised genuine democracy, based on the direct participation of the people in government decision-making and in the legislative process. Women took part in the formulation of government policy and their needs and wishes were taken into account on an equal basis with those of men.

12. The three reports so far submitted detailed the achievements of Cuban women in exercising their right to education. Despite great economic and political pressures, Cuba had been the first country in Latin America where women had attained and maintained high educational levels on a massive scale. Despite Cuba's current difficulties, the quality of education had not been seriously affected. The school attendance rate for children aged between 6 and 14 years was currently close to 99 per cent. Some 543,000 pupils and students were grant-assisted. Girls constituted at least 50 per cent of students at all levels of education, and 74.5 per cent at the pre-university level. For young children who were not enrolled in day-care centres, the Government was implementing a programme of informal early education. In higher education, 58 per cent of students were women and the number of female students entering non-traditional fields of study was increasing steadily; 61.2 per cent of students in the natural sciences and mathematics, 65 per cent of economics students and 68.6 per cent of medical students were women.

13. Incorporation in the workforce and access to technical and vocational training were fundamental rights enjoyed by women and men equally in Cuba. The Government had implemented its employment policy for women in close cooperation with the Federation of Cuban Women. Constant efforts were being made to ensure that women's participation in the labour force did not decrease and that their achievements were not eroded as a result of the current economic rationalization. Women made up 40.6 per cent of the total labour force, as compared with 38.7 per cent in 1989. No further increase would be possible in the short term, since greater economic efficiency would require workforce reductions. However, the fact that the female workforce was highly trained made women better able to adjust to the changes currently taking place in the field of employment.

14. The exceptional measures which the Government had had to take had left no worker without a livelihood. The temporary closure of factories and other

places of work had not left workers without an income or the expectation of employment. A policy of redistribution of the workforce to other, socially useful, activities had been implemented. Workers who were unable to find another job immediately were guaranteed an income equivalent to 60 per cent of their wages. Particular attention was paid to women who were their families' sole breadwinners. It was also important to promote retraining of the workforce for occupations where there was a labour shortage; women had also seized opportunities for self-employment.

15. The role of women in science and technology had been particularly important during the past five years; they made up 43 per cent of the workforce in that area, 53.6 per cent of them at the senior level, and 42 per cent of the country's research workers. In the country's four largest research centres, women made up 45 per cent of the workforce, 47 per cent of technicians and 25 per cent of managers.

16. Huge efforts had been made to avoid any reduction in the services which helped alleviate the burden on working families. Workers' and schools' canteens, old people's homes and centres, and day nurseries had continued to function, against tremendous odds. However, the increasing amount of time spent on transportation and on shopping and washing for the family had added to the burden of working women.

17. Public health was one of the most precious achievements of the Revolution. Women not only benefited from that achievement, but their professional and voluntary activities contributed to it. The average life expectancy of Cuban women was 77.6 years, and the infant mortality rate had dropped from 11.1 per 1,000 live births in 1989 to 9.4 per 1,000 in 1995. The pharmaceutical and biotechnology industries were highly developed, and health professionals were highly trained. Since human well-being was the focus of Cuba's economic and social system, defending those achievements had been of the utmost significance during the current period. The country had succeeded in preserving its high-quality health services, and no one had died for lack of medicine. However, there was a shortage of medicines; their supply was guaranteed to patients with serious medical problems and the population as a whole was being provided with vitamin supplements, but the supply of medicines and other health products was intermittent. Hospitals had managed to maintain an acceptable level of service thanks to the training and dedication of their personnel. Emphasis was being placed on preventive treatment and on controlling risk factors. However, shortages had led to a deterioration in the population's health and hygiene conditions and thus to an increase in the incidence of disease.

18. Major pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment and spare parts suppliers, which had traded with Cuba for years had recently informed the Government officially that they were unable to make deliveries because of prohibitions imposed by federal agencies in the United States, since they used United States inputs or patents for their products.

19. Regarding women's reproductive rights and health, the Government had promoted and firmly supported the documents adopted at the Cairo and Beijing Conferences. Women in Cuba were guaranteed the necessary education and health care and enjoyed freedom of reproductive choice. Contraceptives were

inexpensive in Cuba, since they were subsidized by the State, but there was currently a shortage of condoms and hormone preparations. Intra-uterine devices were widely available and were fitted free of charge at hospitals. With help from the United Nations Population Fund the Government hoped to open a modern factory for the production of oral contraceptives in 1996, which would help to meet current needs.

20. The Government and people of Cuba were working together to find new solutions for promoting the country's development while preserving the objectives of social justice, national independence and effective popular participation. The Government was determined to pursue its policies to enable women to exercise their right to equality fully and to build on past achievements. Cuban women were having to contend with increased difficulties and society as a whole must help to carry on the struggle.

21. Turning to the list of issues prepared by the Pre-session Working Group (CEDAW/C/1996/CRP.1), her Government felt that the follow-up to the Beijing Conference should be based on an integrated approach which included the coordinated implementation of all the outcomes of the major international conferences in the economic and social spheres held in the 1990s. Despite its current economic limitations, Cuba's representatives had participated in the entire regional preparatory process for the Beijing Conference, taking the position that the consensuses reached at previous conferences must be respected.

22. The Beijing Platform for Action did not present Cuba with any major challenges, since the main strategies that Governments were urged to adopt in the area of equality of access to the economy, education, health and legal recognition had already been implemented in her country. However, there were many areas, especially subjective areas, which must be given sustained attention if women were to exercise their rights effectively and break through the cultural and attitudinal barriers which continued to impede their progress. Accordingly, an extensive process of information and discussion of the commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action had been launched in her country. Women and society in general were participating in that process by proposing a variety of creative initiatives. Information and guidance had already been given to the staff of the Federation of Cuban Women, the national party mechanism responsible for the advancement of women in Cuba, on the outcome of the Conference and on the Platform for Action. Similar work had been done with officials from the main ministries involved in the implementation of the national plan. A national seminar on the implementation of the Platform for Action was to be held in April 1996 in cooperation with the UNDP office in Cuba.

Article 3

23. Legal action could be brought by women on grounds of discrimination and, if substantiated, could result in legal penalties. In the case of discrimination in the workplace, women could have recourse to one of the grass-roots organs of labour justice. If they disagreed with that organ's findings, they could go to the labour chamber of the municipal or provincial court. They could also have recourse to the Commission for Women's Employment, whose functions included

ensuring that the reorganization of the labour force did not result in discrimination against women.

24. Under the Family Code and Decree-Law No. 154, women could obtain a divorce through a notary, without requiring legal representation, in cases of divorce by mutual consent between the parties. In other cases, women could obtain the services of a lawyer at a modest price from a group legal practice, especially if they had a low income or none at all, in which case they were generally covered by social assistance benefits.

25. In cases of violence, the woman went to the relevant authorities with a documented report of her injuries, which was provided free of charge by the public health services; she could also be accompanied by any witnesses. In such cases, the police investigator was responsible for bringing proceedings. Depending on the seriousness of her injuries, the case was brought before the municipal or the provincial courts. The woman could also appeal the local court's decision before the Supreme Court.

26. The Prevention and Social Welfare Commissions were another government mechanism to which women could have recourse in cases of discrimination. It was also a common practice for the population at large to have recourse to the complaints and claims offices that existed in the various branches of people's power. While the Federation of Cuban Women was not a government agency, it provided similar services through its offices, to which women had recourse on a daily basis.

27. Her country's authorities would study the matter of incorporating statistics on complaints brought by women on grounds of discrimination, and on the action taken, in its system of information on that issue.

Article 4

28. No temporary measures had been taken to ensure women's participation in decision-making posts, but there was a sustained strategy for maintaining and increasing the advances made by women in the area of decision-making. That was reflected in the Government's consciousness-raising and educational activities on social issues and in the action undertaken jointly with the Federation of Cuban Women to address that issue.

Article 5

29. Despite the positive changes that had occurred in the legal and de facto situation of Cuban women, slower progress had been made in changing the socio-cultural attitudes of men and women. Measures taken by the Government to eliminate gender stereotypes included: incorporating women in all levels of the educational system, thereby providing them with equal cultural opportunities and opportunities for changing stereotypes themselves; adopting new approaches to educational curricula, introducing mixed schools and promoting non-sexist patterns in the distribution of school tasks; and complementing the educational system with "schools for parents" designed to avoid conflicts between the messages given in school and in the family in terms of "sexist" or "non-sexist" patterns.

30. The Ministry of Education and the Federation of Cuban Women were implementing a joint programme, linking home, community and school, through the movement of mothers and fathers for education. Mass organizations promoted public debate of draft laws containing articles on women and family relations. Regular meetings of working women were held in different branches of the economy, in coordination with women's organizations, to help eliminate stereotypes and advance the status of women in each sector. A joint programme of the Ministry of Public Health and the Federation of Cuban Women on responsible motherhood and fatherhood had been launched throughout the country.

31. The Government also supported the activities of governmental and non-governmental organizations within communities, labour collectives and professional associations to promote a debate on issues related to the role of women in society, women's self-esteem and the need to achieve a democratic distribution of housework. The messages given out by the mass media concerning gender roles were strictly monitored and publicity spots were broadcast that stressed equality, cooperation in the home and equal treatment of boys and girls.

32. At the initiative and under the guidance of the Federation of Cuban Women, various women's departments in the country's higher education centres were providing technical assistance on issues of gender equality, with special emphasis on the need to eliminate stereotypes.

33. Notwithstanding the existence of the legal principle of equality and non-discrimination, the problem of domestic violence had not been completely eliminated. Nevertheless, because Cuban women had a high level of self-esteem and also because Cuban society had traditionally rejected such violence, the incidence of domestic violence was lower than in other countries. Domestic violence was not considered a "social phenomenon" in Cuba because it was relatively rare. Although such violence was subject to severe penalties, there was no specific classification of all the attitudes and acts that could constitute violence against women. However, acts of violence, such as causing a miscarriage through violence or causing grievous bodily harm or other injuries requiring medical treatment, were covered under the Penal Code. Threats and coercion were punishable by terms of imprisonment ranging from six months to several years.

34. Under the law, women could seek redress for any violence committed against them. They could obtain the services of lawyers and notaries at little cost and could obtain certification of injuries from family doctors, polyclinics or hospitals. Such certification was sent automatically to police investigators. If women were unaware of their rights, they could seek guidance from government institutions, professional associations or the Women and Family Counselling Centres established by the Federation of Cuban Women. In that connection, the Federation of Cuban Women called on groups of professionals and specialists to impart information to the public on the various forms of violence, the need to prevent it, and ways of tackling it legally, psychologically and educationally.

Article 6

35. The triumph of the Revolution in 1959 had eliminated the economic and social conditions that spawned and sustained prostitution. Schools and vocational centres had been established to help accelerate the social reintegration of prostitutes. Unfortunately, there had recently been a resurgence of prostitution, mainly as a result of the rapid development of tourism. The Government had given priority to the development of tourism following the tightening of the United States blockade and the collapse of the Socialist bloc, in order to attract the hard currency that was vital to preserving the country's social gains.

36. Recent prostitution had developed not as a survival strategy but basically from the desire to obtain goods and services which could only be purchased with freely convertible currencies and which the Cuban State could not guarantee for all the population. Such goods and services were not essential for a person to be able to live decently in Cuba. The massive influx of tourists, and the country's inexperience in dealing with the consequences, was taxing the Government's resources. Most of the new prostitutes were young and, like the majority of Cubans, well educated and in good health. That made it all the more difficult to re-educate them. Although such prostitution was on a small scale and concentrated in tourists areas, the Government and non-governmental organizations were trying hard to combat its causes and to develop ways of dealing with it. The approach taken was not to tolerate prostitution but to combat it through guidance and persuasion. In the long term, Cuba's economic recovery should be a significant deterrent to prostitution.

37. Efforts to combat prostitution were carried out by the National Prevention and Social Welfare Commission, established in 1986 and consisting of State institutions and political and mass organizations; by the Federation of Cuban Women which worked with individual prostitutes and their families at the local level; and by the National Centre for Sex Education, which provided guidance on the risks of prostitution and related phenomena; and through the training in the prevention of prostitution given to the administrative and service staff of tourist facilities. Tourist promotion bodies were not allowed to suggest any link between tourism and sexual pleasure in Cuba. Prostitutes who became involved in theft, anti-social conduct, extortion, or, in rare cases, drug trafficking, were prosecuted under the Penal Code; the penalties included an official warning, monitoring by the police, and re-education in a specialized study or work institution or labour collective. Her Government was aware of the need to monitor the development of prostitution and, if necessary, to adopt new measures or strengthen existing ones.

Article 7

38. Periodic assessments of the advancement of women were made in order to identify the difficulties which persisted and to work on the factors that were hindering greater participation by women in the decision-making process. Systematic publicity was carried in the information media to promote a favourable image of women managers and to help change stereotypes. A decree law regulating the promotion, placement and evaluation of State employees made provision for the training and refresher training of women and their promotion

to decision-making posts. Nevertheless, men still predominated on the rosters for State managerial positions, even though there were many women with the necessary experience and qualifications. The National Assembly encouraged periodic meetings of women delegates and deputies, and seminars, workshops and other activities were organized for women leaders. The President himself was the main advocate for the advancement of women.

39. Statistical data had been requested on the gradual increase in the percentage of women in managerial positions referred to in paragraph 25 of the report. The proportion of women members of the Council of State had increased from 13.8 per cent to 16.1 per cent. In organs of the central State administration, the proportion of women had grown from 12.2 per cent in the early 1980s to 24.5 per cent in the current decade. The number of vice-ministers had increased to 17. In the legal system, women occupied 34.6 per cent of managerial posts, and 55.4 per cent of prosecutors, 43.8 per cent of professional judges and 47 per cent of the members of the Supreme Court were women. In the foreign service, there had been an increase in the number of women in the highest-ranking posts; there were currently 8 women ambassadors, 7 counsellors and 5 consular officials.

40. The reasons for women's lower rates of participation in local organizations was that when officials were elected by direct vote of the population, beliefs, prejudices and cultural patterns inherited from a class-conscious and sexist society came into play; a large proportion of the population still believed that only men should hold elective office because they had more time, fewer personal constraints and a greater aptitude for leadership, while women had exclusive responsibility for child-rearing and housework. However, the number of women candidates increased at a higher level of government.

41. The procedure for the election of the President of the Federation of Cuban Women took place at the congress of the Federation, held every five years. The executive body, consisting of a President and a national secretariat, was elected by direct secret ballot of delegates to the congress. Only 30 per cent of delegates to the congress were professional staff of the Federation; the vast majority were women prominent in various spheres of economic, political and social life and active in grass-roots organizations.

42. On the question of whether there were non-governmental organizations that opposed the Government's policy on women, her Government believed that the requirement that women should be ensured the right to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations did not necessarily mean that those organizations had to be anti-governmental or opposed to government policy. After the Cuban Revolution, many progressive organizations of women, students, peasants, workers, professionals and intellectuals had formed voluntarily and had become powerful forces for economic, political and social change. A new civil society had thus been formed with the broad participation of the masses. The Federation of Cuban Women had been established at the request of women who wished to participate in a process which, for the first time, allowed them to envisage a new life. In Cuba, there was an appropriate legal framework for persons of similar interests to form associations, provided that their objective was in the social interest, as stipulated in article 54 of the Constitution and Law No. 54, the Associations Act. Cuban women, more than 3.7 million of whom

were members of the Federation of Cuban Women, had sufficient guarantees of their right of association and, depending on their wishes and their professional, political and religious interests, could join a wide spectrum of organizations. They were also ensured equal access with men to Cuba's non-governmental organizations, which numbered over 2,000. On many occasions, legislative initiatives of the National Assembly or the Council of State had originated in proposals made by Cuban mass organizations. At its recent sixth congress, the Federation of Cuban Women had made hundreds of recommendations which would be implemented by ministries and institutions of the Government. Strengthening civil society and ensuring a plurality of opinion on the basis of a platform which did not undermine national unity was the best guarantee of Cuba's independence.

Article 11

43. With regard to women's percentage representation in production sectors, under the law, Cuban women could not be discriminated against in respect of employment and could join the labour force without restriction. Women had free access to all sectors of the economy and enjoyed the same opportunities as men at all levels of education and in all fields of the economy, science and culture. Women represented 40.6 per cent of the labour force and 30.8 per cent of workers in the productive spheres; it should be borne in mind that women had joined the labour force much later than men and that there were many non-traditional activities in which women were only gradually increasing their presence.

44. On the question of whether any research had been conducted on differences in remuneration, article 42 of the Constitution was the legal norm which provided for equality of opportunity in employment, including the right to equal pay for equal work. However, women were represented in greater numbers in the non-productive sphere, where wages were naturally lower. Nevertheless, 63 per cent of technicians and professionals were women, and they received high salaries. No research had been carried out on any differences which might exist in the average wages of men and women within the same sector; however, the question had been raised, and would continue to be analysed by the Government.

45. With regard to the percentage of women who were unemployed, the Government was constantly monitoring the impact on employment of the current process of economic change and was according priority to determining the real availability of the labour force and the characteristics of labour supply and demand with a view to the rationalization and redistribution of the labour force. With the adoption of measures for economic recovery, some manning tables were being cut, but there were some sectors where more workers were needed and some types of work which were not attractive to the population, such as agriculture and other necessary services. The rate of unemployment was likely to change, especially considering the high level of qualifications of both men and women. There was currently an increase in the number of self-employed persons, and self-employment was particularly significant as a viable option for women.

Article 12

46. Access to health services was ensured for the entire population, free of charge. Particular attention was paid to maternal and child health. Between 1985 and 1984, there had been a decline in the number of stillborn babies born to girls in the 15 to 19 age group. However, that age group had never had the highest fertility rate; the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups had always had the highest birth rates, and there had been a steady decline in stillbirths among mothers in that age group between 1985 and 1994. The maternal mortality rate for girls between 15 and 19 years of age was 29.1 per 100,000 live births, one of the lowest rates in Latin America and the Caribbean. The rate had declined because of educational and preventive work carried out by the State and by mass organizations. Despite the blockade and current difficulties, the decline in infant mortality had continued; in 1995, the rate had fallen to 9.4 per 1,000 live births.

47. On the question of maternal mortality resulting from abortion, she said that national surveys had shown that only 39 per cent of the abortion deaths reported resulted from abortion as such and that the remainder resulted from complications of ectopic pregnancy and hydatidiform moles. It should be noted that in Cuba, where abortion was legal, detailed statistics were kept, whereas in other countries where abortion was illegal there was considerable underreporting. Table 5 in the addendum to the report showed that deaths from abortion had declined by 9.2 per 100,000 between 1980 and 1994 and that abortion was not the main cause of maternal mortality, but took third place after other complications and puerperal complications.

Article 14

48. She referred the Committee to paragraphs 161 to 163 of the addendum to the report for information on the collective ownership of agricultural property. Since 1959, women had been subjects at law who were entitled to own land on the same conditions as men. The Constitution specified that land belonging to small-scale farmers could be inherited only by those who had personally worked it, with a few exceptions of which several applied to women.

49. The problem of discrimination against women who did unpaid farm work was a complex one which was limited in scope and difficult to solve. It affected only very small-scale farming, where private ownership still existed. The women in question were family members of the male or female owner of the land, and it was traditional for them to provide unpaid agricultural labour. There was a seasonal demand for the work of other local women, who were in fact paid according to their output. The Family Code stressed the economic value of all work done by women, and the Federation of Cuban Women and the National Association of Small-scale Farmers, together with rural women, had emphasized the injustice of that situation and the need for recognition and compensation of women's participation in the rural economy. However, it was currently impossible to correct the situation through governmental regulation or to assert that the practice discriminated against women, since male family members often worked under similar conditions. With the Revolution and the promotion of agrarian reform, many women had become landowners, and their numbers had gradually increased as other women inherited land from their fathers or

husbands. Currently, 9 per cent of individual landowners were women, and women accounted for 18 per cent of the members of the Farming and Livestock Production Cooperatives, 13.6 per cent of the members of the Basic Units of Cooperative Production and 26.7 per cent of the membership of the State agricultural sector. Although progress in that area had been modest, the situation of rural women continued to be a Government priority and government policies in general had had a favourable impact on the standard of living and attitudes of such women.

50. With regard to the right of rural landowners to credit and bank loans, Cuban law made no distinction between men and women. She referred the Committee to paragraphs 176 to 182 of the addendum to the report.

Article 16

51. The Convention stated that the betrothal and the marriage of a child had no legal effect and that all necessary action should be taken to specify a minimum age for marriage. The Committee had expressed concern at the fact that in Cuba, the minimum age for marriage was 14 for women and 16 for men, which was contrary to the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The term "child" was commonly interpreted as referring to anyone who had not attained his or her majority. However, Cuba's interpretation of "minor" made a distinction between early childhood and adolescence, a distinction that was reflected in the legal system. Thus, Cubans gained the right to vote at age 16, the right to work at age 17 and attained their majority at age 18. Except in exceptional circumstances, 18 was also the minimum legal age for marriage. Girls could obtain permission to marry from the age of 14 and boys from 16, only when there was good reason. That was not discrimination, but was intended as a means of protecting young girls in rural areas where, traditionally, marriage and cohabitation at puberty had been common. As education and socio-economic progress overcame those traditions, under-age marriage was disappearing and it would soon be unnecessary to legislate on it. She recalled that, when Cuba had ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it had made a declaration with regard to article 1 to the effect that, in Cuba, 18 years of age did not constitute legal majority for all civil acts under current domestic legislation. Its marriage laws did not, therefore, conflict with Cuba's ratification of that Convention.

52. The CHAIRPERSON conveyed the Committee's deep solidarity with the women of Cuba, as it had done in the case of countries suffering from sanctions imposed by the Security Council. It was clear that the economic embargo had not produced the expected political results but had, instead, resulted in extreme deprivation for the people of Cuba, especially women and children. Given that difficult economic situation, she admired Cuba's achievements in the area of gender equality, particularly with regard to health and education; such progress was all the more surprising for a country which belonged to a region where the female illiteracy rate was high and where women's human rights with regard to health care were often not respected.

53. She regretted that Cuba had not followed the Committee's guidelines in preparing its report, even though its exhaustive replies to the questions put by the Committee had given a better picture of the country's current situation. She appreciated the fact that the Government was implementing the outcomes of

the Cairo and Beijing Conferences and noted Cuba's strict compliance with human rights instruments, although the report seemed to place no particular emphasis on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. However, it was not clear to her how the Federation of Cuban Women, with a membership of over 3 million, could serve as the national machinery for dealing with women's issues.

54. While the report's discussion of prostitution was extremely frank, she did not understand why the phenomenon was spreading so widely. It seemed to her that women who had access to real power and a high level of self-esteem would not turn to prostitution, even in difficult economic situations, and she felt that more attention should be devoted to preventing the spread of that practice.

55. Ms. ABAKA recalled that in September 1995, the Cuban National Assembly had approved a relaxation of restrictions on foreign investment, which had amounted to quasi-privatization. While the affordability of education had not been affected by that policy, she wondered whether there would be consequences for sanitation, including rural water supply, and for health care and housing. She hoped that privatization would not alter the level of State responsibility for social services and that Cubans would continue to enjoy their current standard of living.

56. Cuba was a multiracial society and she was convinced that racial discrimination was not, in fact, a problem there. However, she noted that the composition of the Cuban delegation to the Committee did not reflect that multiracial character, nor had it at the time of the initial report. She wondered whether certain stereotypical roles were assigned to the different races and whether Cubans of all racial groups had been involved in the preparation of the report.

57. Ms. SATO noted that the Cuban Government had entered a reservation to article 29 of the Convention and wondered whether that reservation might be withdrawn in the near future. She asked why, as stated in paragraph 4 of the addendum to the report, the population of Cuba comprised slightly more men than women, whereas the reverse was true in most other countries.

58. Ms. LIN Shaqzhen said that Cuba's record over the past 30 years in the fields of health and education was outstanding for Latin America and comparable with that of many developed countries. However, she shared the concern expressed by Ms. Sato with regard to the population statistics.

59. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that the report provided little information on social minorities. The socio-political situation seemed similar to that of her own country, Burkina Faso, where the revolution of 1983 had ushered in great social progress and increased opportunities for women, but had also led to a reduction in individual freedoms which had implications of social equality. Moreover, revolutionary governments frequently gave little decision-making power to women who were not politically active, and she wondered whether that was the case in Cuba. She was also concerned that the transition to privatization might result in underrepresentation of women in the elite managerial sector, and asked what the national machinery was doing to improve women's chances of entering that sector.

60. Ms. ESTRADA CASTILLO said that she deplored the existence of an ongoing state of war in Cuba. She requested further information on the relationship between equality under the Constitution and de facto discrimination and, given Cuba's great progress in the fields of health, education and labour over the past 30 years, wondered why gender-based discrimination persisted, why it was greater in some sectors of the economy than others, and what the Government was doing to combat gender stereotypes. She hoped that, despite the difficult economic situation, it would be possible to reinstate programmes to combat gender discrimination through television and the education of children. Lastly, she asked how men and women spent their leisure time, since it was clear that household tasks in Cuba were not divided equally between men and women.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.